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California Farmland Conservancy Program

Focus on Farmland

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This edition of Focus on Farmland features:

- Department Welcomes New Director
- CFCP Funds Easements in Merced, Sutter and Monterey Counties
- Legislative and Grant Funding Updates

The Department of Conservation Welcomes Its New Director

Governor Schwarzenegger recently appointed a new director – **Bridgett Luther Thompson** – to head the Department of Conservation. Sworn into office on September 1 by Resources Agency Secretary **Mike Chrisman**, Thompson is a “green” Republican, has worked as a fundraiser, and has a background in farmland protection and water quality issues. She earned her degree in business administration from Vanderbilt University and was a residential real estate broker from 1987 to 1998 in Charlotte, North Carolina.

A member of both the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society, Thompson has a long history of involvement in environmental protection. While a resident of North Carolina, she helped create the first recycling education program in the Charlotte area. She also led campaigns to create neighborhood parks and acquire land to protect the region's water quality. She helped establish the Carolinas office of the Trust for Public Land.

In 2003, Thompson became the national development director for Republicans for Environmental Protection (REP America). Most recently, Thompson has been the regional development director for Hands On Bay Area, a volunteer management non-profit organization. She managed the group's fundraising efforts and developed partnerships with a variety of public and private entities in the Bay Area, all the while staying involved in environmental issues.

Because of her work with the Trust for Public Land, Thompson is very keen on the Department's farmland preservation work. “The issue of disappearing farmland is very sad,” she said. “There's a real need for the kind of protection we offer through our programs. I know from experience what a nice feeling it is to look at a farm that's been preserved by a conservation easement and think, ‘I helped make that happen.’” Thompson attributes her interest in farmland to spending her early years in a small farming community in Missouri, where the locals “have a good sense of the land, a good sense of place.” “In California, we have some of the richest farmland in the world and we need to protect it.”



The Department's new Director, Bridgett Luther Thompson, pictured here with Resources Secretary Mike Chrisman.

CFCP Funds Humboldt Ranch Easement in Merced County

This spring, the Central Valley Farmland Trust (CVFT) completed the purchase of a 263-acre agricultural conservation easement in Merced County. The purchase was made possible through an \$831,250

California Farmland Conservancy Program grant and \$265,000 from the Great Valley Center. This is the first easement to be held by the Central Valley Farmland Trust, which was recently created by the merger of three land trusts in Merced, Stanislaus and Sacramento counties.



John and Jeani Ferrari, at an event celebrating the placement of an easement on their ranch in Merced County.

planted with almonds, peaches and walnuts, all major commodities in Merced County. In the late 60's John Ferrari's father purchased the farm, cleared the land, set up irrigation, planted the fields and brought in modern farming techniques.

Known as the Humboldt Ranch, the property is located near the unincorporated community of Delhi, east of Highway 99 and south of the Stanislaus and Merced County line. The property's more than 3,000 feet of frontage on Highway 99 helps create a buffer of agricultural open space between Delhi and the City of Turlock in Stanislaus County.

Farm Management Inc., whose principal shareholders are John and Jeani Ferrari, granted the easement to CVFT. The ranch is currently

Pressure from Bay Area commuters has spurred development around Delhi. Most of the land within Delhi's Specific Urban Development Plan has been developed. This easement, along with others nearby, contributes to the vision of an East Delhi Farmland Security Perimeter to the north and east of Delhi.

Ducks Unlimited Protects Sutter Basin Farmland with a CFCP Grant

Ducks Unlimited, Inc., (DU) recently purchased a 723-acre agricultural conservation easement on Shannon Ranch, with assistance from a California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP) and a federal

Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) grant. Located in the fertile Sutter Basin adjacent to the Sutter Bypass, Shannon Ranch predominantly grows rice.



Shannon Ranch in the Sutter Basin, protected by an easement through the efforts of Ducks Unlimited.

The acquisition was part of DU's Conservation Easements for Agricultural Lands Program, developed to identify, promote and purchase agricultural conservation easements in the Sutter Basin. In addition to its importance as a farming area, the Sutter Basin is an extremely important area for waterfowl and other wetland-dependent species. The

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Sutter Basin is being threatened by rapidly expanding urban growth from Yuba City on the north and Sacramento and Woodland to the south.

DU, one of the largest conservation organizations in America, purchased the easement with \$622,100 in funding from CFCP, \$270,000 from FRPP, and \$180,900 from the landowner via a bargain sale.

CFCP Grant in Monterey County Preserves King City Ranch

In September, the Monterey County Agricultural and Historical Land Conservancy purchased an agricultural conservation easement on the 234-acre Swenson Farm. The rectangular property is located approximately one mile southeast of King City, with Highway 101 at one end and the Salinas River at the other. It is adjacent to an existing easement on the Petit Ranch. The farm produces typical Salinas Valley crops, including several lettuce varieties. The soil and morning fog make the area one of the few locations in the country suitable for lettuce and other crops in the spring through fall months.

“This will help bolster our efforts to protect farmland in this vicinity,” said Sherwood Darington, president of the Monterey County Agricultural and Historical Land Conservancy. “Here in the ‘Salad Bowl of the World,’ we’re blessed with some of the world’s best farmland. We’re working to direct growth, which is inevitable, toward lesser farmland as much as possible. This particular parcel of land should never be anything but farmland.”

The California Farmland Conservancy Program awarded \$687,050 to the land trust to purchase the easement. The land trust, founded in 1984, has completed 45 projects that protect more than 15,000 acres of agricultural properties in cooperation with state, county and federal programs, private foundations, and the American Farmland Trust.



Lettuces growing on Swenson Ranch near King City. An easement on the farm was recently completed by the Monterey County Agricultural and Historical Land Conservancy.

Legislative Updates

The first year of the 2005-06 legislative session ended in September, with many bills carried over to await further action next year. Senate Bill 695 was among the many bills that were approved by the Legislature and sent to the Governor’s desk. The bill, sponsored by the Sierra Club and authored by Senator Kehoe, would have required the Secretary of the Resources Agency to establish a central public registry of all conservation easements acquired with assistance from the state on or after January 1, 2000. The following information was proposed to be included in the registry for each conservation easement:

- (1) The recordation number assigned by the county recorder.
- (2) The purpose of the easement.
- (3) The location of the easement, identified by county and nearest city.
- (4) The identity of the easement holder.
- (5) The size of the easement in acres.
- (6) The amount in dollars, if any, of the state’s contribution towards the easement transaction.

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The Governor ultimately vetoed this legislation. In his veto message it was noted that existing law already requires county recorders' offices to provide online access to conservation easement information for easements in each county and that this bill would result in a nearly duplicative effort.

Another bill, which was signed by the Governor, was Assembly Bill 365, authored by Assemblyman Salinas. This legislation recognizes the essential nature of greenhouses in agriculture, and clarifies that greenhouses are to be treated the same as open-field agriculture for the purposes of qualifying for property tax assessments under the California Land Conservation (Williamson) Act. The Governor noted in his signing message that this bill does not change local prerogative to include greenhouses uses in local Williamson Act definitions of agriculture use or in agriculture zoning ordinances.

For additional information on these or any other bills you can access the Legislative Counsel's website at <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/bilinfo.html>.

Grant Funding Updates

The Department of Conservation's California Farmland Conservancy Program received an appropriation of \$14.94 million in Proposition 40 bond funds for the 2005-06 Fiscal Year. These grant funds are available on a continuous basis pursuant to the CFCP's ongoing Request for Grant Applications (RFGA). The RFGA and additional grant application and management resources are available on the Program's website at: <http://www.conservation.ca.gov/dlrp/cfcp/funding>. As always, the CFCP encourages prospective grant applicants to make contact with the Program as early as possible in the development of projects, so that we can provide consultation and feedback on individual grant proposals.

The Department has signed a Cooperative Agreement with the Natural Resources Conservation Service for the administration of \$4.3 million in 2005 grant funds from the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP). These funds represent a portion of the funds made available within California under the FRPP and are available for easement projects where CFCP matching funds will be used. The FRPP operates under an application timeframe that is based upon a single request for proposals each year. This year, the release of the request for proposals took place in April. For applicants contemplating the use of these funds it is good to anticipate the timing of the next request for proposals. For more information on accessing these federal funds, Jim Kocsis of NRCS is the direct contact within California. He can be contacted at jkocsis@nrcs.usda.gov.

The California Farmland Conservancy Program, administered by Department of Conservation's Division of Land Resource Protection, is designed to ensure that the state's most valuable farmland will not be developed. Through the program, local governments and nonprofit organizations can receive grants to purchase development rights from willing landowners, thus creating permanent conservation easements.

We hope you've found this issue of *Focus on Farmland* useful and informative. Please contact us with any questions or ideas you have for future editions. Feel free to forward this email to other interested parties.

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